



Bomb Shelter

a short story by STEPHANIE KOVEN

I pushed the toy car in the dry earth

between the roots of the maple tree in front of our house. Our empty school bus went by. I remember this because it was Saturday, and I'd never seen the bus go by on Saturday.

"Mrs. Farley just drove by in the bus," I said to my big sister Lila, who had just finished building a house out of Lincoln Logs. She'd even put in a driveway and little bushes on either side of the front door, made out of boxwood twigs stuck in the ground.

"So?" Lila said, not looking up. She was too old to be playing with Lincoln Logs and was just killing time until her friend Vicky came over.

My car was a pink Barbie beach buggy with decals on the side. It had been part of Lila's Beach Barbie collection when she was younger, and it was too big for the driveway of the little log house. Lila had kept a Matchbox car for herself, a silver Mercedes station wagon.

"Wouldn't it be funny if Mrs. Farley thought today was a school day? She'd wonder why all the kids had missed the bus, and then she'd get to school and realize it was Saturday! That would be funny, don't you think?"

"I guess," Lila said, putting four sticks into a rectangle behind the log house. "This is the pool. I'm going to make a diving board for it."

When she'd finished, she stood up and brushed her hands against her cheerleading skirt. Vicky was supposed to show up any minute so they could practice their routine for school. Vicky's mom was real thin, unlike our mom, and drove a white Cadillac with air conditioning and electric windows.

When the Cadillac pulled up in front of our house, my sister went out to meet it. Vicky had her cheerleading uniform on, too, and carried her pompoms — one gold and one blue, the Allendale High School colors.

"Hey, Vick," Lila said. "Hi, Mrs. Bander."

"Hello, Lila." Then she said to Vicky, "I'll pick you up at five, after my hair appointment," and she gave them a little wave as she drove away.

The Banders lived in the new development in Tremount. They'd moved there a year ago from New Brunswick when Mr. Bander got transferred. He worked in the big office building out on the highway. Their house was real neat, and they had all brand-new furniture. I knew this because our mother had dropped Lila and me off there once when she had to go someplace. Lila and Vicky played on the trampoline in the backyard, practicing kicks and rolls. They told me there wasn't enough room for three people, so I sat by myself in the Banders' wood-paneled den and watched television until I got bored and went upstairs to look around.

The door to Vicky's bedroom was open, so I peeked inside. She had a white canopy bed with a pink satin bedspread. On one end was a mound of pillows of all different colors and shapes, including one that said, "You're #1!" and another with a needlepoint yellow smiley face. On the bedside table was a paperback book with a picture on the cover of a long-haired girl riding a black horse that was rearing up, and next to the book was a little dish with a ring and a necklace in it. The ring fit my middle finger. It had a small blue stone. The necklace didn't look like real gold, but it had a heart-shaped locket that you needed long nails to pry open. The walls were covered with posters and pictures cut from magazines of Scott Baio and the lead singer from the Bay City Rollers and Parker Stevenson, who played Frank on *The Hardy Boys*. There was also a glass case filled with miniature china animals. I opened the front and took one out, a swan, its white neck curved as if it were cleaning its back feathers. I thought about putting the swan in my pocket, but then I heard something downstairs. When I rushed to put it back, all the others fell over. I shut the glass door and dashed to the bathroom across the hall.

"What is she doing up there?" I heard Vicky ask as she pounded up the stairs.

"I don't know, Vick. I told her to watch tv," Lila said. "She can be a real snoop."

"I'm in here," I said. Vicky was right outside the bathroom door. "I've got a real bad stomachache." I had pulled my shorts down and was sitting on the toilet, in case she came in or something.

"She says she's got a stomachache," Vicky said, going into her room, "but I think she's been snooping in here."

Lila came upstairs, and they put Bobby Sherman's "Seattle" on the record player. I got off the toilet.

The bathroom had blue tile and identical blue sinks right next to each other, so two people could brush their teeth at the same time. They even had blue toilet paper. In the medicine cabinet above the sink was a lot of makeup, a jar of Noxzema, some Clearasil, and a box of floral-scented douche. Inside the box was a clear plastic bottle with a long funnel neck on it. I had seen commercials for Massengill, but I'd never known anyone who used it. On the floor right beside the toilet was an open box of maxi pads, which meant Vicky had gotten her period — before Lila.

"Does your sister have to hang out with

us?" Vicky asked as she walked up the steps to our yard, where I was still playing with the oversize pink beach buggy.

"No, she'll leave us alone — right, Alicia?" Lila said, staring at me hard and pointing to the house. I went inside, because I knew she could beat me up if she wanted to. She had done it before, when I'd crossed the invisible line she'd drawn to divide our bedroom. She'd pushed me against the wall, knocking the wind out of me, and said Daddy had left because I'd been born. It was true he'd left pretty soon after I came along, but my mother said it wasn't because of me. It was because of him, though I wasn't sure what it was about him that had made him leave.

On the kitchen table was a note from my mother, who had driven off before we'd gotten up that morning. The note said, "I've gone to market. There's iced tea in the fridge." I looked in the fridge, but I didn't see any tea in there.

"Lila, did you drink all the iced tea?" I shouted.

"No!" she shouted back.

I read the note again, then rechecked the fridge. The orange plastic pitcher Mom always made iced tea in wasn't in there, or on the counter. It wasn't in the dining room or in the freezer, where we put drinks sometimes if we wanted to make them real cold. I started opening all the cabinets until I found the pitcher, full of iced tea, on a shelf next to a box of Triscuits.

"Lila!" I hollered out the door. "Mom put the iced tea in the cabinet!"

Lila lifted the needle from the record player she had set up outside using an extension cord hanging out the window. She looked annoyed. Vicky continued with the cheerleading routine even though the music had stopped.

"So what?" Lila shouted.

"Why didn't she put it in the refrigerator, where it's supposed to go?"

"I don't know. It was a mistake. Forget about it."

Lila put the record back on, picked up her pompoms, and rejoined Vicky.

I took a few Triscuits, poured myself a glass of tea, and put the pitcher in the fridge. The Triscuits were stale, but I was hungry. It was almost one o'clock. I sat down near the open window, where I had a good view of Vicky and Lila. They were doing kicks, and I could see the special panties they wore under their skirts to cover up their underwear. Vicky was clearly the better of the two; she kicked her shapely, muscular legs effortlessly into the air, which made me feel sorry for my sister. Lila just couldn't get her legs as high as Vicky could, especially when she used the pompoms. Vicky could tell, and she stopped to watch Lila and clap her pompoms together and shout, "Again! Higher! Straighten your legs! You've got to get them higher!" Lila kept trying, her face turning bright red, but the kicks weren't getting any higher. Vicky turned to me. "She's not kicking as high as me, is she?"

I hadn't realized Vicky knew I was watching. Lila was panting and squinting at me like she would beat the crap out of me if I said something. But I was safe inside the house.

"Almost, but not quite as high, I guess," I said.

“Get lost,” Lila told me, looking hurt. I felt bad.

I went upstairs to Mom’s room. On the way I had a weird feeling that maybe I would find my mother dead in her bed, the bottle of pills she kept in the drawer of her bedside table empty on the floor. I could imagine her dead body perfectly: she had a strange smile on her face and was wearing her red coat and shoes, and her pocketbook was next to her as if she’d been planning to go to the grocery store but had decided to kill herself instead. But when I peeked inside her room, no one was there. The bed was unmade. There were clothes on the floor. I went to the drawer of the bedside table. Everything was exactly the same. There were the letters she’d written to her father from camp when stamps had cost only five cents, and some photos of her as a young girl, one without a shirt on, which I guessed was OK since in the picture she didn’t have any boobs yet — not like Lila, who’d gotten her first bra in seventh grade, though she still hadn’t gotten her period. And the bottle of pills was still in the drawer, where she always kept it. I’d taken one once, just to see what would happen. I’d thought maybe it would make me happy, which is what Mom said they did for her, but I didn’t feel any happier, or any sadder. I felt pretty much the same, which made me wonder if Dr. Fridello was tricking her.

I looked at my Popeye watch, a Christmas present from the year before, and wondered why my mother wasn’t back yet from the grocery store. I hoped she’d come back with something good to eat. I shut the drawer and went downstairs and outside. The music was off, and Lila and Vicky were sitting on the patio drinking iced tea and laughing about something.

“Lila, where do you think Mom is?”

“What do you mean?” Lila said, irritated. “You read her note. She’s at the grocery store.”

“But don’t you think she should be back by now?” It took only fifteen minutes to get to Califon — unless she had gone to Shoprite in Chester. She hadn’t told us which store she was going to, after all.

“I don’t know! Maybe she’s gabbing in the vegetable aisle,” Lila said.

Vicky laughed.

“What are we going to have for lunch?” I asked.

“I don’t care. Have whatever you want.”

I went back to the kitchen. I could make peanut butter and jelly, or tuna if there was any mayonnaise, but I was sick of eating that. I wanted sliced deli meat, turkey or ham, with Muenster cheese on a roll with a pickle and chips. I opened the refrigerator again and stared inside. There was a drumstick from two nights ago and a bowl of cold rice on the shelf. The door was full of crusty bottles of mustard and jelly and a bottle of ketchup turned upside down. I could see two pieces of bread, both ends. They always got left for last.

I worried whenever my mother went to the grocery store without me, because sometimes she stole stuff, like Hershey bars with almonds, or Extra Strength Tylenol, and I was scared she would get caught and put in jail. The sign posted on the door of the store manager’s office said: WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO INSPECT ALL BAGS. SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO

THE FULL EXTENT OF THE LAW. And the picture next to it was of a mean-looking man with dark circles under his eyes, as if he hadn’t slept in days. He wouldn’t give my mother another chance if she got caught. No, he’d put her in jail, and then we’d have to go live in Pennsylvania with Aunt Joanie and her two ugly boys and go to their dumpy school.

I went back to where Lila and Vicky were sitting and picked up one of Vicky’s pompoms. I had always wondered how they held on to them, whether there was a strap or a handle or something inside all that fringe.

“Give it!” Vicky hollered. “Lila, can’t you control your little sister?”

Vicky lunged toward me, but I was able to move away just in time, the gold strands of the pompom flopping all over my arms as if it were alive. “Douche bag, douche bag, Vicky has a douche bag!” I yelled, not really sure why.

“You don’t even know what one is!” Vicky shouted.

“Oh, yes I do!” I darted away from her. “I saw it! I saw it in the blue bathroom!”

“You little snoop!” Vicky screamed. “Lila, did you hear what she said?”

Then I fell. It happened very quickly and was nothing, really. I tripped over a flowerpot and came down on my knee, scraping it. My hair was in my face, and I had bitten my tongue, which hurt more than my knee. Vicky’s red-painted nails dug into my arm, and she ripped the pompom out of my hand.

“Serves you right!” Lila shouted, seeing my knee was bleeding.

I remember looking at the sky, then touching my tongue to the back of my hand and seeing flecks of blood. The sun was hot and directly overhead, but I suddenly got the chills. The hair on my arms stood up, and the skin got all bumpy, and I started to cry. Maybe it was the flecks of blood on the back of my hand, or maybe the thought that my mother had gotten arrested or killed herself or been in a car accident or who knew what. My nose was running, and I was shivering like it was winter. Lila and Vicky were just sitting there, annoyed, staring in the opposite direction.

“When’s Mom coming home?” I cried, in between sobs. “She should be back by now.”

I’d thought I was crying as hard as I could, but thinking about my mother again, and all the things that would happen to us if something happened to her, made me cry even harder. Lila got up and stood over me, her arms folded. And that’s when she offered to show me the bomb shelter.

“Me and Vicky are going down there. If you stop crying you can go,” she said.

“But Mom says I’m not allowed.” I wiped my nose on my shirt.

“Mom’s not here,” Lila said, standing up. “I won’t tell her if you don’t.” She smiled.

(end of excerpt)